

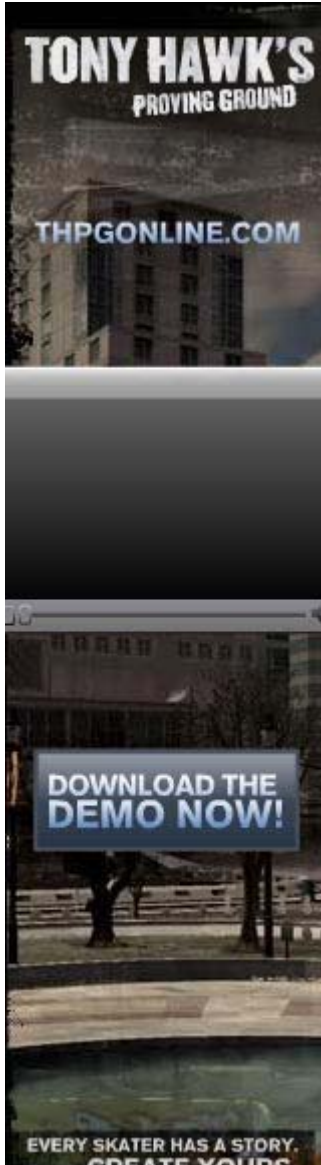


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## The Drifters

### The Drifters: Greatest Hits Live [DVD]

(MVD Visual)  
US release date: 26 June 2007  
UK release date: 18 June 2007

by Jack Patrick Rodgers

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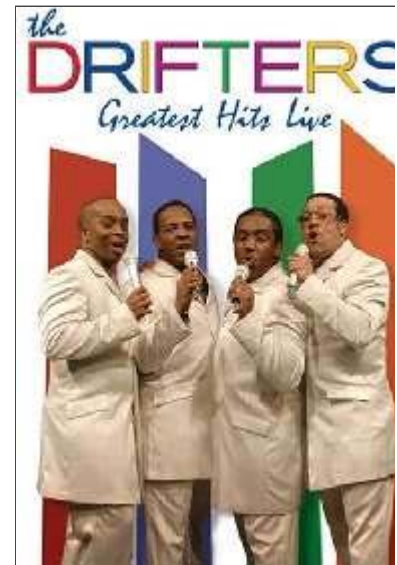
First, a word of caution to our uninitiated readers out there: don't make the same mistake that I did and assume that this Greatest Hits package, available as both a CD and a live concert DVD, is from the same Drifters that produced such hits as "Save the Last Dance for Me" and "Up on the Roof" in the late '50s and early '60s. Those songs and other classics are on here, but as for the musical group performing them, that's a more complicated story.

It turns out that even during the golden age of the Drifters (over 40 years ago), there was never a consistent line-up of singers. Performers rotated in and out on a regular basis, and one of the group's biggest hits, "Under the Boardwalk", had Johnny Moore on lead vocals on his first day back with the group after the previous lead singer had died of a drug overdose just the night before. And so the Drifters continued on in this fashion, and they still tour today, with a playlist full of songs that were written decades ago. Because they don't have any new material on the horizon (and likely won't ever) the group that exists is officially sanctioned a "tribute band".

There's nothing wrong with the current Drifters line-up of Peter Lamarr, Patrick Alan, Rohan Delano Turney, and Victory Bynoe. They're all competent singers, but like the contestants on *American Idol*, they seem technically skilled yet soulless. They know the lyrics to all the songs, but they're reciting the words instead of feeling them in their bones. Their backing orchestra also sounds unimpressive, and put together, the whole experience feels hollow and forgettable.

Just compare their performances to the originals: "This Magic Moment" fused together the orchestra's lush wall of sound, starting with those violins stirring to life all in unison, with the rich voice of Ben E. King almost shaking with emotion as the rest of the group provided backup in deep bass. Compared to the Drifters who first recorded that song, the newest members sound like kids in a middle school talent show.

Even the staging of their live performance leaves a lot to be desired. While singer Turney notes in the DVD extras that his first concert had an audience of over 48,000 fans, this one takes place on a small, cramped stage, and what we can see of the crowd makes it look like they're numbers barely reach a few rows deep. I was also annoyed by the tendency of the singers to hold up the microphone to the audience and insist that everyone sing along if they



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know the words. That might work if you're actually at the live performance, but watching it at home on DVD, it comes across as a cheap, cheesy ploy to keep people involved in the music. (It's even more distracting with the music of the Drifters, which at its best sounds larger than life and doesn't lend itself well to sing-alongs). Even worse, Turney, at one point, interrupts a song to yell to the crowd, "Sexy ladies say yeah!" Is that what the fans want to hear, drown out the orchestra?

At the least the DVD contains most of the Drifters' big hits; the CD is missing a number of classics, like "This Magic Moment" and "There Goes My Baby", yet bizarrely makes room for a cover of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline". On the plus side, the CD doesn't have the group pandering to the crowd and it includes three bonus videos, which were obviously filmed at the same time as the concert seen on the DVD. In fact, one of the videos is an exact copy of a performance available on the DVD, although the other two songs, covers of "Stand By Me" and "White Christmas", are better than most of what's on the CD. Maybe they should have made room for them and relegated some of the weaker tracks to the computer-accessible bonus material.

And I'm sorry to say that everyone interviewed in the DVD's documentary, including both the current group members and assorted behind-the-scenes talent, comes off as embarrassingly shallow on the topic of what made the Drifters extraordinary. Peter Lamarr insists that the songs of the Drifters are special because people associate them with memorable moments from their own lives: he explains that hearing "Save the Last Dance for Me" might remind someone of a wedding, for example. Yes, but this is true of all great music; it's hardly a phenomenon specific to the Drifters.

Likewise, Victor Bynoe argues that the Drifters' music was so popular because "all the songs were about... being happy. None of it is about darkness or anything like that. It's all good stuff". Really? What about the heartache of "There Goes My Baby" and "I Count These Tears" or the paranoid jealousy underlying "Save the Last Dance for Me", where the narrator tells his girl that she can dance with other guys as long as she promises not to go home with any of them?

Ironically, Bynoe is correct in that none of the Drifters' songs are particularly depressing, even if he doesn't articulate why this is the case. Underlying all of their songs is the understanding that having a broken heart isn't a permanent condition, and that the only cure (if you're a straight guy) is to find a new girl. The Drifters could provide the soundtrack to the entire history of a relationship: the awkward early flirtations ("Dance with Me"); the first kiss ("This Magic Moment"); the punch-drunk elation of the first few months of dating ("Saturday Night the Movies"); the fear of losing her to someone else ("Save the Last Dance for Me"); the pathetic, futile attempts to hold onto her once it's clear the romance is doomed ("Please Stay"); the wistful longing right after the break-up ("There Goes My Baby"); the pain of seeing her with another man and the selfish hope that she'll break his heart, too ("I Count These Tears"); the aimless wandering in between relationships ("On Broadway") and; finally, of course, moving on to the next pretty young thing. Their music is uplifting and soulful because it knows that most romances are seasons in our lives that come and pass, and we have to enjoy them while we can.

But nobody in the documentary comes close to explaining why these songs have stood the test of time. Instead, we get over 45-minutes of the group members patting themselves on the back for managing to keep the good name of the Drifters alive. Intriguing questions, when asked, are never answered. It's suggested that the Drifters, unlike most musical acts, are able to keep adding new talent while maintaining the same name due to an unusual legal situation, although no one bothers to explain it. Likewise, there are a few throwaway comments that the group does most of their touring these days in England, where they're far more popular (apparently only the Drifters' earliest songs were hits in the US, while their latter work found success in the UK), but then there's no follow-up to shed some light on the situation.

The DVD special features also includes a duet between the Drifters and pianist Gary Brooker, but it's just another unremarkable extra on a disc that fails to either provide satisfying covers for these songs or illuminate the group's place in music history. These guys might constitute the Drifters today, but 100 years from now, it will be the original songs that people are still listening to as a soundtrack to their own great romances and tragic heartaches.

RATING: 